

CONSUMER ALERT

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Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade & Consumer Protection



Utilities Scam Targeting Hispanic Consumers Statewide

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MADISON – Consumers across the state of Wisconsin are receiving fraudulent phone calls from imposters who claim to work for the local electric company. These phony customer service representatives appear to be targeting Latino consumers in an attempt to collect payment for what they claim are “past due statements.” They instruct their victims to wire money or load money onto a prepaid debit card immediately to avoid having their power shut off.

The Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) has seen an increase in the number of calls from Spanish-speaking consumers who have been contacted in these scams. Over the past week, the agency has received six utility scam reports from the Green Bay area alone.

“These scammers will tell you that you are months behind on your utility bills and must pay at once. If you tell them that your payments have been on time, they will tell you that your meter must be malfunctioning and you have to pay for a new one,” explains Sandy Chalmers, Division Administrator for Trade and Consumer Protection. “If these scammers call you, do not engage them. Hang up immediately.”

DATCP has long been alerting consumers to scams in which crooks use prepaid cards and wire transfers to accept payment for a variety of supposedly legitimate transactions. This most recent rash of scams seems to be specifically targeting Hispanic consumers across the state. Here is how it works:

- Imposters are telling utility customers that they have past due balances or broken meters.
- Customers are instructed to go to a drug or retail store and load anywhere from \$200 to \$1,000 onto a prepaid, reloadable debit card, and then call back with the card and PIN number in order to transfer the balance.
- Some scammers are asking for a wire transfer instead of a prepaid card number for payment.
- Imposters tell customers that if payment is not received by a specific time, usually within one hour, the customer’s power will be shut off.
- Scammers can “spoof” a caller ID system, making it read whatever they would like. DATCP has heard from consumers who have had their utility company’s name pop up on their caller ID when they were contacted in this scam.

If you are contacted by someone saying you owe money to your utility company:

- Hang up the phone.
- Call your utility company using the number listed on your monthly statement to verify your account balance.
- Report any fraudulent bill collection calls to your utility company.
- File a report with your local police.
- Call DATCP’s Consumer Information Hotline at 1-800-422-7128.

Remember:

- Reputable businesses do not require payments through prepaid cards or wire transfers. They will give you multiple options to pay.
- NEVER give your debit or prepaid reloadable card PIN number to ANYONE, individual or business. The PIN number must always remain secret, no matter what anyone tells you.

(MORE)

- NEVER send a wire transfer to someone you haven't met in person.

For additional information or to file a complaint, visit the Consumer Protection Bureau at <http://datcp.wisconsin.gov>, send an e-mail to datcp@datcp.wisconsin.gov or call the Consumer Information Hotline toll-free at 1-800-422-7128.

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